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SHOULD MULTI-COUNTRY ADVERTISING RESEARCH
BE UNIVERSAL OR UNIQUE?

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Business Administration

#550

College of Commerce and Business Administration
University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

FACULTY WORKING PAPERS

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February 23, 1979

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Summary:

Despite considerable degree of multi-country advertising and marketing research, the question of universal or unique approaches to conducting research in different countries still remains unresolved. Based on a review of past research efforts and case histories, this paper suggests that extension versus adjustment of advertising research methodology depends upon at least two major factors.

The first factor is related to the advertising function itself in terms of measuring the impact of media vs. content of advertising.

The second factor is related to the effects of advertising in terms of measuring behavioral or attitudinal impact of advertising on the market place.

Finally, it is suggested that all advertising research can be classified into four categories based on the interaction of the above two factors. For example, media research limited to measuring behavioral effects of media will be easy to extend from country to country. On the other hand, content research limited to measuring attitudinal effects will be most unique and, therefore, will need adjustment across countries with respect to research methodology and procedures.

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INTRODUCTION

Every time we are asked to do cross-national advertising research, we must worry about comparability of data across countries (ESOMAR, 1971; Dunn, 1974; Plummer, 1977). Unfortunately, we still do not know the situations and conditions under which we can clearly justify a universal approach to advertising research. The purpose of this paper is to explore those situations or conditions which indicate that one must make adjustments in his research methodology and procedures in conducting multi-country advertising research. Not only should we identify the determinant conditions for making adjustments, we must also identify specific areas of research methodology which must be adjusted in the presence of a determinant condition. In other words, this paper will address the problem of what to change or adjust in multi-country advertising research under what specific conditions or situations.

Such an understanding is, of course, highly useful in several ways. First, it can increase productivity and cost effectiveness of advertising research by enabling the researcher to extend standardized research procedures where it is appropriate. Second, it can minimize the unnecessary differences of opinions and the resultant debates among cross-national advertising researchers from different countries and disciplines working together on a single research project such as life style research or media readership research. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it can be helpful in reducing the vast numbers of international advertising blunders (Ricks, Fu and Arpan, 1974; Sheth, 1978) by providing better inputs to the advertising management decision making process.

ELEMENTS OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Advertising research as a specific application of market or survey research consists of at least four major elements, and we must resolve the dilemma of extending vs. adjusting research procedures with respect to each of the elements.

The first element of advertising research is the sampling plan. Since it is neither possible nor cost-effective to survey the total population, we end up drawing a sample of the population we want to investigate. This creates the need to ensure generalizability and appropriate statistical inferences from the sample to the population. The problem of ensuring generalizability from the sample to the population is aggravated in the multi-country setting due to variability in the definition, composition, size and concentrations of the target

population in different countries. For example, the high degree of concentration of the population in two or three cities among Northern European and Middle Eastern countries, and similar concentration of population in the rural villages in the third world countries will require some adjustments in the sampling procedures.

The second element of research methodology is the data collection procedure. It includes the choice we must make between a mail survey, telephone interview, personal interview or some other hybrid procedure of data collection. The variability in the literacy rates in the perception and fear of intensiveness, and in the accessibility of the respondent across countries generates the challenge to the researcher if he wants to extend a specific data collection method across countries. For example, lack of telephones in many third world countries as well as high degree of illiteracy often requires that the researcher must use personal interviewing as a method of data collection. Similarly, in many of the Islandic countries, it is not possible to interview the woman without the presence of an adult male member of the household. Finally, countries vary in their desire to participate in survey research due to many reasons including fear of government prosecution, low opinion of survey researchers, and irritation toward advertising as an institution.

The third element of research methodology is the response instrument. It includes questionnaire construction (wording, format, scale, length), panel diaries (audits) as well as psychophysical (pupil dialation, galvanic skin pressure, eye movement, etc.) and electro-mechanical instruments (Nielsen Audimeter, split-run cable T.V., etc). The response instrument is probably the single most susceptible element of research methodology to many cross-national differences. Naturally, it is also the most debated and difficult area of advertising research in terms of carrying out cross-national research activity. A number of cross-cultural factors have been identified as potential sources of response bias which the researcher must contend with. These include cross-national variability in language, cultural values and connotations with respect to time, space, friendship and agreement, technological advancement and cultural differences in personality development and social structures (Sheth & Sethi, 1977). Many of the international advertising blunders can be often attributed to the failure of multi-country advertising research to pinpoint cultural differences in the meanings, evaluations and emotions associated with the same advertising stimulus.

The last major element of research methodology is inference. It refers to the procedures of making substantive inferences from the data about the reality for advertising decisions. It includes all areas of experimental designs, model building, and utilization of specific research tools and techniques such as motivation research, clinical research and multivariate research. The institutional and

technological differences among countries with respect to training and expertise in those areas seem to cause concern among researchers whether comparable inferences can be achieved in multi-country advertising research. For example, field experiments especially in conjunction with other elements of the marketing mix such as price or promotion often cannot be standardized due to differences in the legal and marketing practices of countries. Similarly, some of the more fancy multivariate techniques and mathematical modeling cannot be universally implemented due to lack of computer technology and professional research staff especially in the client organization. Finally, the high degree of training and specialization as well as greater reliance on the specialist's judgments and interpretation required in qualitative research (psychoanalytic, clinical or motivation research) generates the need for comparability in inference in cross-national research.

In the next section, we will examine some of the criteria for classification of advertising research and how cross-national factors might require making adjustments from country to country with respect to the four elements of research methodology. The most salient factors which restrict standardization in cross-national research are summarized in figure 1.

CRITERIA FOR CLASSIFICATION OF ADVERTISING RESEARCH

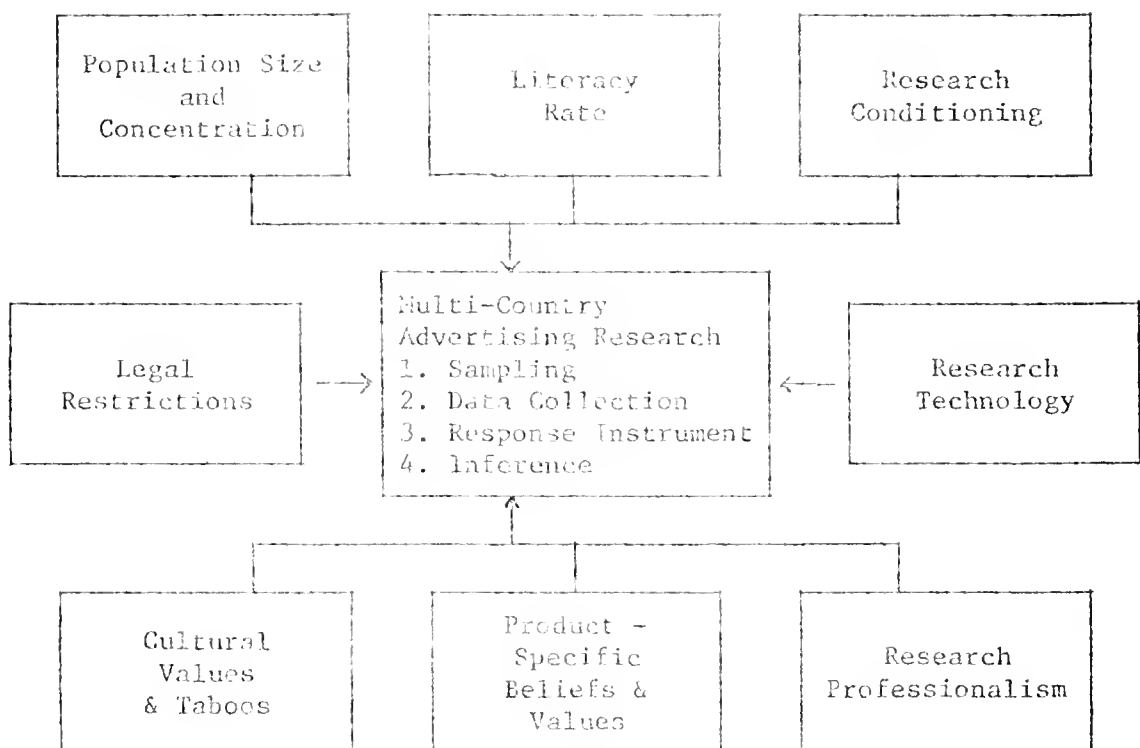
While there are many different ways to classify advertising research, it seems most appropriate, from the viewpoint of multi-country advertising research, to look at two specific criteria. They are (1) different components of advertising and, (2) different types of advertising effects.

Although different components of advertising include copy, background, picture, sound, movement, media and other aspects, it is perhaps most common to create a dichotomous classification in terms of media vs. content of advertising since most advertising research is generally categorized as media research or copy research. As we will see a little later, this broad categorization in terms of components of advertising is highly useful in resolving the dilemma between universal and unique advertising research across countries.

Similarly, the effects of advertising can be numerous. If we utilize the classical hierarchy of effects model (Lavidge and Steiner, 1971), it is possible to measure the impact of advertising in terms of awareness, knowledge, interest, desire, preference, conviction and action stages of the hierarchy. Similarly, we can look at different functions advertising performs or can perform and, thereby, measure its effects with respect to providing information to consumers, reminding them to consume a product already bought, persuading them to switch from a competing brand name, reinforcing them for their choice, resolving the dilemma to buy or not to buy the product, and to shape their life styles and values (Sheth, 1978).

Figure 1

FACTORS AFFECTING CROSS-NATIONAL
ADVERTISING RESEARCH



Once again, it seems parsimonious and more useful to categorize advertising research in terms of two major types of advertising effects. They are: (1) Behavioral effects of advertising and include exposure, attention, recognition as well as actual purchase behavior of the consumer such as shopping for, and buying and using the product or brand name. The behavioral effects of advertising are measurable in terms of hard data and they are limited to counting the numbers of people manifesting a given behavior such as reading the advertisement or buying the product. (2) The second major type of advertising effect is called Attitudinal effects, and it includes measuring the impact of advertising on comprehension, knowledge, interest, preference buying intentions as well as multiattribute cognitive beliefs about the product. The common denominators among all the attitudinal effects of advertising are that they measure the mental as opposed to behavioral aspects and that the data generated are generally regarded as soft data subject to considerable degree of variability and lack of verification.

Based on the above two criteria and their classification, it seems possible for us to classify most advertising research techniques into the following four categories as presented in Table 1. The list in each cell of the table is only illustrative rather than exhaustive, since there are many modifications of each example of an advertising research technique available on a commercial basis from different research suppliers. For example, circulation and media research for measuring coverage and readership aspects as well as pulsing research and field experiments for measuring sales effects of media advertising are all examples of behavioral effects of media. On the other hand, media, corporate and brand profiles on a list of attributes as well as overall preferences and intentions are those advertising research techniques which are primarily interested in measuring the attitudinal effects of different media. Similarly, recall, recognition and awareness research techniques attempt to measure the behavioral effects of content of a specific advertisement. Finally, playback techniques, perceptual and preference mapping, as well as the general area of qualitative research are mainly concerned with measuring the attitudinal effects of specific contents of advertisements.

It is now possible to suggest some guidelines about which type of advertising research can be extended universally with minimal changes and which other type will require some or most adjustment in a cross-national setting. The guidelines are summarized in Table 2. Later, we will enumerate each of the four types of advertising research and the degree to which adjustment is needed in a cross-national study. However, it is important to note that, by and large, media research tends to require less adjustment as compared to content research. Similarly, measuring behavioral effects of advertising tends to require less adjustment in research procedures as compared to measuring the attitudinal effects of advertising. Therefore, the biggest changes and adjustments are required when one attempts to measure attitudinal effects of content of advertising.

Table 1

CLASSIFICATION OF ADVERTISING RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

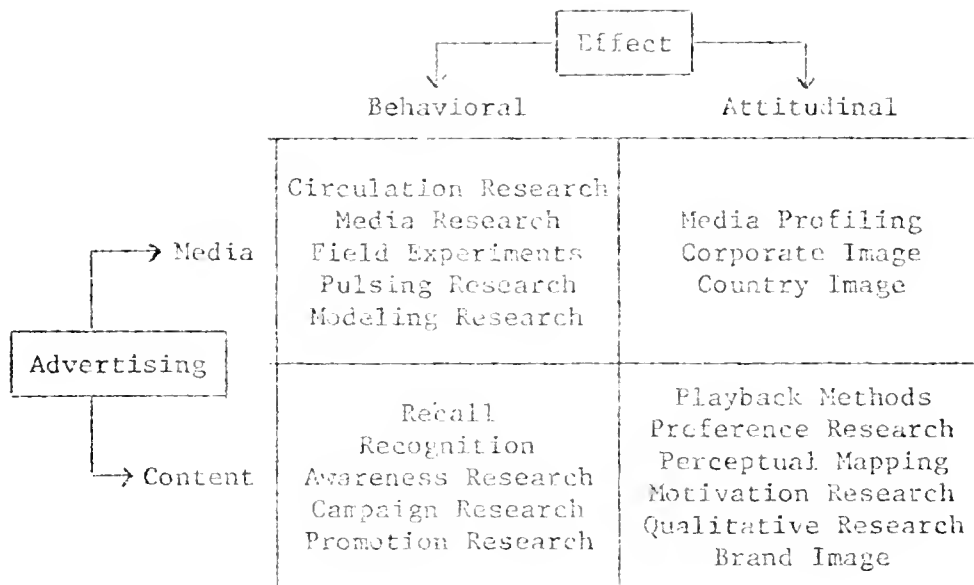
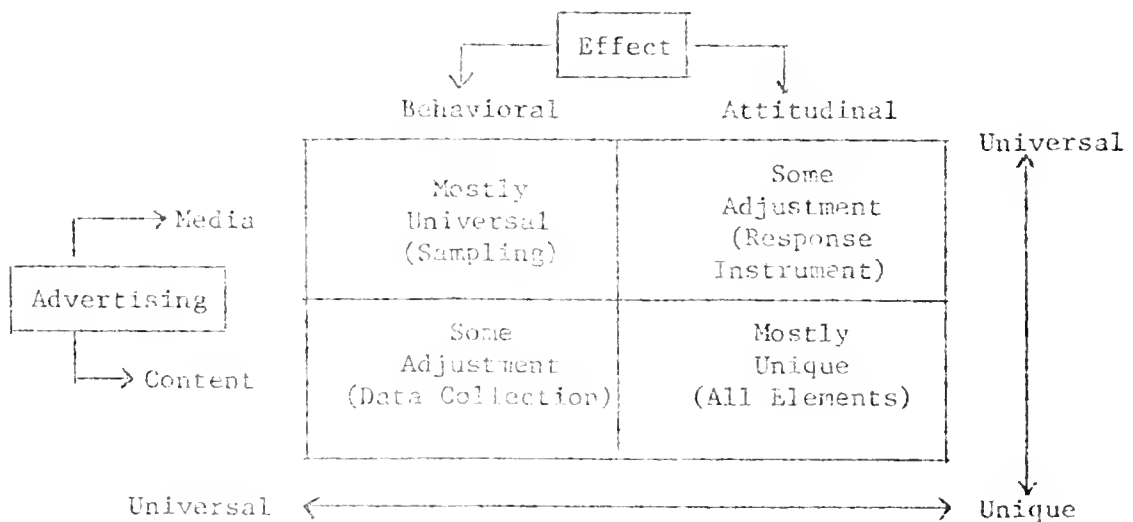


Table 2

GUIDELINES FOR UNIVERSAL vs. UNIQUE
MULTI-COUNTRY ADVERTISING RESEARCH



1. Behavioral Measures of Advertising Media. It would appear that audience research and media research are least susceptible to adjustment in a cross-national study since they entail measurement of size and type of audiences for specific media and the extent of their readership of specific media vehicles. The broad categories of media (newspapers, television, magazines, radio, direct mail) are fairly universal across countries and the behavioral measures are primarily numerical. Therefore, there should be no need for making major adjustments in research procedures related to audience and media research studies. Perhaps the only exceptions to this universality of research are likely to be with respect to sampling plans and data collection methods due to unique population sizes and concentration as well as different literacy rates. However, in many of the advanced countries, it seems that a standardized research methodology can be easily implemented with respect to audience and media research. For example, we can adopt some of the more recent nonrandom sampling procedures and weighting schemes to offset unique population concentrations.

Similarly, it seems that field experiments and modeling or simulation research approaches to measuring the purchase behavior effects of alternative media can be extended universally with minimal adjustments. The experimental designs and models are general research frameworks and the behavioral measures with respect to purchase behavior is fairly standardized to allow for a uniform advertising research in this area on a cross-national basis. Once again, the only exceptions may have to be made with respect to sampling plans and perhaps data collection methods.

2. Attitudinal Measures of Advertising Media. The bulk of advertising research in this area is centered around measuring and profiling various media, brands and companies with respect to reader preferences and beliefs. For example, many media researchers attempt to provide the psychological profile of their readers and the reasons for their readership. Reader's Digest stands out as an example of this type of research so far as media profiling research is concerned. Similarly, there are numerous research studies on corporate and industry images on a global basis especially since the energy crisis of early seventies. For example, oil companies have engaged in a considerable degree of research in this area of advocacy advertising (Sethi, 1978).

To the extent that attitudinal effects of media entail measurement of the mental state of the individual respondent, we are forced to use linguistic stimuli and paper and pencil methods of research. This will immediately necessitate linguistic changes in our research instruments. Similarly, attitudes and attitude changes are reflections of a highly congruent set of beliefs and values. Since values and prior attitudes will vary significantly from country to country, it is likely that belief structures on which to profile media, corporations and nations may have to be adjusted.

In other words, advertising research techniques which attempt to measure attitudinal effects of media will need more adjustment in a cross-national study than the techniques which concentrate on measuring behavioral effects of media. The primary area of adjustment will be the response instrument including wording, content and scaling of cognitive responses in a questionnaire. It is possible that the concern for obtaining accurate and comparable measures may also require changes in the data collection procedures. For example, personal interviews may be necessary to ensure proper understanding of the questions in some countries.

3. Behavioral Measures of Advertising Content. The advertising research techniques most commonly prevalent in this area are the aided memory techniques such as recall, recognition and brand awareness studies. The best known among the aided memory tests are Starch Readership Studies for the print media and Ted Bates method for television advertisements. Measuring the behavioral effects of advertising content is primarily concerned with linking the content of an advertisement such as copy, pictorial representations, color, size, humor, background setting, etc., with some numerical effect in terms of noting the ad, remembering it or buying the brand as a consequence of the content of the advertisement.

The element of research which is most likely to be adjusted in this area of research seems to be data collection methods. Even though the behavioral measures are numerical, they entail assessment of human memory judgments. Similarly, the stimuli used are contents of specific ads. Both make it difficult to generalize a given procedure of data collection from country to country. For example, the portfolio method of measuring recall and recognition is not likely to work in countries where both spouses work to a greater extent because of time limitations generated by their work schedule. Similarly, measuring effects of sales promotion may be difficult to accomplish by a universal data collection procedure since there may be legal and institutional restrictions imposed on specific types of promotions and sales.

4. Attitudinal Measures of Advertising Content. The research techniques which attempt to measure attitudinal effects of advertising content are playback techniques, preference research, perceptual mapping research, and several qualitative research techniques including motivation research. A common denominator of all of these techniques is that they require considerable degree of professional judgment in making interpretations and inferences from the data. Unfortunately, in the cross-national setting, these interpretations are likely to be subject to "self-reference criterion" of the researcher who is likely to be trained based on the value system of a given culture. It is very difficult to outguess the criteria of preference judgments or to understand the "hidden persuaders" of people belonging to other cultures and values. Therefore, these

techniques must need considerable degree of adjustment so far as inferences are considered. Either the researcher must be versatile by training or experience to understand and relate cross-cultural psychological values or the research study must involve a team of local nationals, each one an expert in his own culture or subculture.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, it would appear that the degree of adjustment needed in a cross-national advertising research study is partly a function of the area of advertising and partly a function of the type of advertising effect we want to measure. By and large, media related research is relatively easier to extend universally as compared to content related research. Similarly, measuring the behavioral effects of advertising is relatively easier to extend universally than measuring the attitudinal effects of advertising.

Therefore, audience research, media research and field experiments carried out to measure behavioral effects of advertising media are most generalizable with the possibility of adjusting for sampling aspects. On the other hand, preference research, motivation research and brand image research carried out to measure attitudinal effects of advertising content are least likely to be generalizable across countries, and they would entail greater degree of uniqueness in the design of the study, in data collection procedures, in response instruments, and most importantly in making inferences from the data. In between, research techniques for measuring behavioral effects of advertising content such as recall and recognition tests and campaign or sales promotion research will require some changes, primarily with respect to data collection phase of the total research study. Similarly, research techniques for measuring attitudinal effects of advertising media such as media, corporate and country image research will also require some changes, primarily with respect to the development of the response instrument.

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